

# BECOMING GEOLOGIC

Representations of Stones in Contemporary Art



by Teresa Carlesimo and Michael DiRisio

In Jimmie Durham's *Self-Portrait Pretending to be a Stone Statue of Myself*, 2006, a large stone held in front of the artist's face dominates the frame. The photograph follows the proportions of a standard portrait, but disrupts the form by concealing his face—the potential for intimacy is denied and the sharp, angular features of the stone become foregrounded. It is evident from his surroundings that he is in a wooded area, but the location is not clear. Despite this lack of context, the land is still brought into view, raised into the image frame through the rock that supersedes his face to challenge Durham in his role as the subject of the image.

As the social function of the self-portrait shifts with the evolution of photography, its relation to status and value shift too. In 1931 Walter Benjamin surveyed this shift in his *Little History of Photography*, where he wrote that in photography's early period, portrait photographers catered primarily to the rising classes. After 1880, however, technical advances and industrial production opened the medium to broader publics, and extensive retouching and artificial highlights came into vogue in an attempt to have the photograph continue to ascribe status within this class dynamic (a precursor to today's Photoshop). Given the portrait's relation to status and value, Durham's disruption invites us to consider what happens when a portrait becomes centred on a less conventional subject. His firm grip on the stone places it front and centre, yet the visible sliver of his face creates a tension; the stone might be the subject, but Durham remains present, active in the construction of the image, even if he is attempting to supplant his own likeness.

In the end his likeness is lost and, despite what the image's title suggests, this is not a stone statue of himself. Yet the title points toward the significance of stones within Durham's practice, where they resonate with a social and political force. They give added weight—both literally and figuratively—to sharp critiques of both overt, direct violence, and more subtle and systemic forms of protracted genocide, as well as the social stratification that Benjamin keenly observed emerging in our capitalist system. Within these works the stones have a presence, which—much like in his *Self-Portrait*—positions them firmly in the foreground. In a political economy that views rocks and stones as low-value raw material—the very *unprecious* neighbour of precious metals—and an artistic canon that too often places them in the background or beneath the subject's feet, Durham's stones reject this devaluation and dismissal. In a more pointed gesture, Durham can be seen in his 1995 video *A Stone from Metternich's House in Bohemia*, which was co-created by Maria Thereza Alves, throwing a stone at a museum display case. More than an act of institutional critique, this action attempts to shatter the paradigm of value that



supports both the colonial status and class dynamic that Durham rejects.

In the decade since Durham's *Self-Portrait*, we have seen a wave of representations of rocks and stones created by artists to address complex social, political, economic and ecological issues. The status of these stones is in turn reconsidered, where the colonial notion that subjectivity resides in humans alone is challenged, while our narrow view of temporality is expanded in an attempt to comprehend geologic time. While photographs and videos of stones abound, work by Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, Tsēma Igharas, Maggie Groat, and Kelly Jazvac, as well as exhibitions like "Rocks, Stones, and Dust" at the University of Toronto Art Centre (now Art Museum) feature particularly poignant representations of stones within critical reflections on capitalism and colonization. In reflecting on these works, we asked why stones were featured in considerations of property, political economy and planetary crisis, and how looking more closely at the stones themselves can broaden our understanding of subjectivity and sociality—the very notions that underpin these social forces.

# PROPERTY AND PRODUCTIVE LABOUR

In her recent exhibition at Gallery 44 in Toronto, Tsēma Igharas (formally Tsēma Tamara Skubovius) exhibited two large lightboxes with photographs of obsidian, bookending a long braid of flagging tape—the kind used by foresters and mining companies for marking commercial sites and property lines. The obsidian appears larger than life-size, offering a strikingly detailed view of the stones. Titled “Ore Body,” the exhibition was motivated by her embodied experience of contemporary mining practices. In the exhibition’s didactic she states: “My investigation for this work grapples with the body, my body as it has witnessed material and metaphysical landscapes changing and continually impacted, shaken and consumed by corporate resource extraction.” She situates this extraction within the broader cultural logic and paradigm of value in which it operates. The didactic moves from her embodied experience of this industry to a consideration of:

... how the value of land and natural resources are created and assessed through Western measures-of-wealth (social, economical, environmental, power, ownership) and how these types of evaluations impact traditional and contemporary cultural production in the Canadian wilderness, which is still considered an untapped frontier for natural resources.

The photographs of obsidian have a heaviness to them, and a presence that speaks to the significance of this impact.

Reading further, it is revealed that the flagging tape was braided with horsehair, which, as she states, is “used in place of human hair in Indigenous mask making.” She chose to do this in order to signify the weaving of industry and body. The lightboxes’ origin in consumer advertising further connects these images to the wealth and power that she addresses, while the braided flagging tape speaks to the property regimes that underpin this consumption.

As we surveyed works that explore the social and ecological implications of rocks and stones, this pervasive consumption kept arising. In Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens’ multi-channel video and installation *The Golden USB*, 2014-, for example, the artists create a fictional, albeit expansive, trade catalogue of a wide range of everyday objects. As with many of the objects presented in the videos, their representations of rocks and earth position the material not as valuable in-and-of-itself, but as possessing only a potential for exchange. These objects are raw material to be exploited. In one of the videos, Lemmens can be seen picking up a large chunk of clay and earth from the ground, holding it in front of the camera briefly, then tossing it out of frame. The way she discards it is particularly telling; there is a carelessness that communicates little interest in conservation. Her actions appear similar to those of a prospector, digging here and there as they survey the area, with no concern for their impact on the land.

Within our current political economy this attitude is not incidental; Ellen Meiksins Wood argues in *The Origin of Capitalism* that land enclosure, colonialism and changing property relations were at the heart of the emergence of capitalism. She references John Locke’s claims that the products of the earth have almost no value without productive labour by humans, and observes that “Locke’s point, which not coincidentally drips with colonial contempt, is that unimproved land is *waste*, so that any man who takes it out of common ownership and encloses it—he who removes land from the common and encloses it—in order to improve it has *given* something to humanity, not taken it

away.”<sup>1</sup> As with *The Golden USB*, this perspective considers the earth wasted without productive labour, in turn naturalizing the exploitation of both land and labour.

In a similar tone, Maggie Groat’s collage *Tools, architectural fragments and materials for building*, 2013, portrays a carefully arranged series of both natural and manufactured material. Each object is seen in the context of the potential they might hold for the built environment—their value as materials *for building*—and their use as tools for productive labour. Isolated and abstracted from the landscape, the stones and fragments featured are re-contextualized within this devalued framework; the breadth of possible values they might represent is diminished by their singular function within this dominant political economy.

Considered in the context of other work by Groat, the absurdity of this devaluation can be seen more clearly. In *Trying to Give the Moon Back to Itself*, 2009, for instance, she purchased a plot of land on the moon through the Lunar Registry, which claims to control mineral rights, and subsequently gifted that plot back to the moon. Two legal documents mounted in simple black frames reflect this transaction. Her title makes clear that this process has the potential for failure; she is *trying* to give the moon back to itself, but uncertain of the outcome. This uncertainty seems to emphasize the absurdity of the whole process; if the moon cannot possess clear ownership of its own land, then why should others. The implications for ownership on Earth are, in turn, made apparent, as is the nod toward planetary crisis.





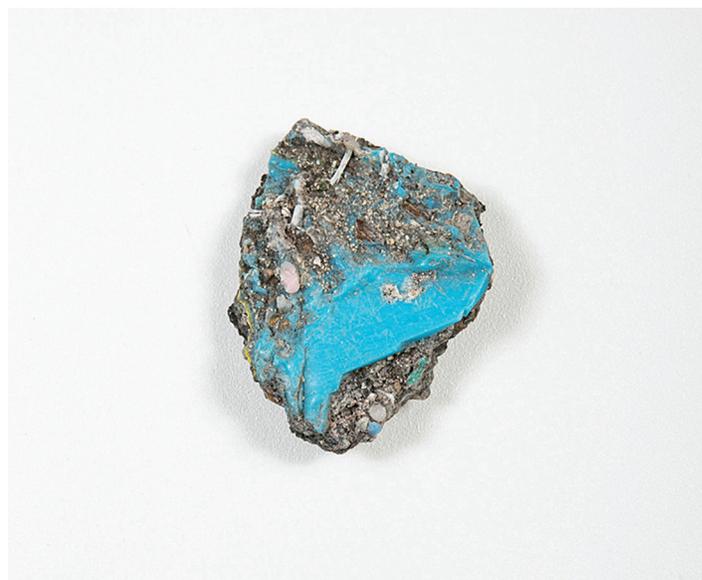
# GEOLOGIC TIME

*“...if the Anthropocene calls us to image humanity written into the rock of the Earth itself, capitalism is the instrument of this brutal inscription.”*

The theme of time and temporality figures prominently in discussions of planetary crisis. As a proposed epoch, the Anthropocene could be understood as a geologic record of our accelerating industrial present, as human activity is being imprinted upon the Earth's strata and is predicted to endure well beyond the human time-scale. In this way, this concept beckons us to imagine ourselves as inhabitants of deep-time, thereby collapsing human and planetary timescales past, present, and future. This is particularly challenging for linear and anthropocentric conceptions of time, since planetary transformations that register on the geologic scale are often too slow for human faculties to perceive. The rock cycle that is the formation, erosion and reformation of rocks and stones is, of course, so gradual that we usually perceive them as permanent and unchanging. But what can be said of this distinct imprint human activity has been leaving upon recently deposited strata, most notably since the middle of the last century? While aggressive resource extraction is immediately observable for instance, other processes such as radioactivity, chemical pesticides use, and ocean acidification will all leave long lasting scars but remain less readily apparent.

One of the places where these scars are apparent is in plastiglomerate, a new formation of stone discovered on Kamilo Beach, Hawaii, which combines natural debris that has been fused together by melted plastics. Named by oceanographer Charles Moore, geologist Patricia Corcoran, and artist Kelly Jazvac, plastiglomerate is a curious-looking material that reflects the confluence of elements that contribute to its creation. Kamilo Beach's location coupled with unique ocean currents have made it an ill-fated dumping ground for several tonnes of plastic marine debris per year. A conglomerate by-product of hyper-consumption, these new stones vary in material appearance. Occasionally they have a peculiar appeal, with bright, candy colours interlacing the natural materials of pebbles, wood and sand; whereas others are far more ominous, as discarded objects remain identifiable, such as a cigarette lighter seemingly transformed into stone.

Plastiglomerate is expected to enter the fossil record, permanently marking the spike in human pollution beginning around 1950, coincident with the invention of the now ubiquitous plastic polymers. While the use of plastics has continued to increase at a staggering pace in roughly 75 years, this brief timeline obscures the complex temporality resonating through these stones. Plastics are made up of millions of years of life and energy that has been brought forward to the present, often for only a few minutes of use as a straw or plastic bag, before being discarded, requiring hundreds or thousands of years



to biodegrade. Offering a glimpse far into our geologic past and future, plastiglomerate seems to defy time itself.

Commonly seen photographed on a white background, Jazvac's plastiglomerate stones read as an unusual sort of consumer good, framed within a product photography that manages to elevate the objects without reducing their grittiness. The evident garbage woven into the stones contrasts with the stark white ground, complicating their elevated status as the subject of the image. While Jazvac commonly displays these hybrid stones as readymades—which further alters their relation to value and commerce given the readymades origin in the emerging consumer culture of the early 20th century and the increasing penetration of capital into everyday life—it is these photographs taken by Jeff Elstone of Jazvac's readymades that most viewers will encounter. Considering the extensive media coverage this new phenomenon has received, these images have experienced a wide circulation and their relation to product photography offers a telling indication of the political economy within which they have emerged.

One of the strengths of Jazvac's work with plastiglomerate is that it connects this political economy to a range of other social and ecological issues, which may otherwise appear disparate and disconnected. Critically reflecting on plastiglomerate invites a discussion of the interconnectedness of these issues, as well as the extent to which capital has permeated everyday life, a process that has only accelerated under today's hyperconsumption. Cycles of production, consumption, and waste are compressed into these unsettling forms and the gathering of plastic debris from faraway continents onto this remote island exposes the planetary distance that often exists within these cycles—highlighting the massive imbalance in both contribution and vulnerability to our unfolding ecological predicament. Appealing to the broader social relations underpinning the formation of these stones, Jazvac states that she is interested in addressing the “network of complex relationships that include gender, race, colonization, geography, power, and capital.”<sup>3</sup> The social strata that Jazvac refers to resonate within the geological strata where plastiglomerate is found. While plastiglomerate does not directly address the full range of these issues, it effectively points toward a certain confluence of actions that often remain invisible.

# ALLIES AND AGENCY



While Kelly Jazvac's practice nods toward geologic time, Igharas' work similarly unsettles a narrow view of temporality, one that has significant implications for how we understand ourselves in relation to rocks and stones. A member of the Tahltan First Nation, Igharas states that the Tahltan people have mined obsidian since time immemorial, and that it is still collected on Mount Edziza, located on unceded Tahltan

territory in northern British Columbia. In her interview published in Gallery 44's didactic, she reflects on the significance of this rock. As she states: "This rock contains the memory of my family and is a marker on the land upon which my people moved." It is for this reason that she takes a more nuanced view of obsidian; she is deeply critical of the colonial and capitalist enterprise that drives corporate mining, yet she values the significance that the material has for the Tahltan people. In containing the memory of her family, however, it is not a passive material to be acted upon, but a relational one.

Groat's collage *Living Rocks, Counter Weights and Items for Catching the Light*, 2013, invokes a similar relationality, with a tightly organized collection of rocks, shells and other inorganic material on a black background. While it is the title that initially directs the viewer toward this matter as *living*, the lack of a focal point leaves the objects floating in the frame; they are removed from the trappings of an identifiable landscape and, existing independently, are valid subject matter in their own right. Durham's work also frequently addresses our perception of the weight of the stones he uses, with boulders crushing airplanes and automobiles. Here these boulders appear to have arrived on top of these vehicles of their own volition, playing with our understanding of them as inert. As indicated by a geologic timescale, however, we know that stones are not fixed and unchanging. Tectonic plates shift, sediment is deposited and erodes, entire new strata are formed.

Just as representations of stones have emerged as a visual strategy for comprehending the interconnectedness of social, political and ecological issues, some thinkers are positing a paradigmatic shift in how all matter and material is understood. Referred to as "new materialisms" and emerging out of contemporary critical theory, this discourse ascribes agency to objects and environments, which are viewed by many as inanimate. Philosophers Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton are key proponents of these new materialisms, staking claim to these so-called emergent ways of knowing. When considered in the context of non-Western worldviews, however, these new materialisms are not so new after all.

Métis scholar Zoe Todd points out that Indigenous knowledge systems have long held complex and diverse understandings of sentience and agency. In her 2016 essay "An Indigenous Feminist's Take On the Ontological Turn," Todd writes about attending a lecture by Latour addressing the climate as a common cosmopolitical concern. She describes waiting with bated breath for Latour to credit a single Indigenous thinker for developing and maintaining multiple ways of

knowing that engage with sentient environments, and which describe a deeply woven interconnectedness between all relations. In the end, no mention was made. While she is critical of Latour's oversight, she acknowledges that it is a structural issue. The broader focus of her criticism is indicated by the subtitle of her paper: "'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism."

In a statement for Jimmie Durham's 2003 exhibition "A Shadow in Athens," Durham wrote that he has been attempting to free stone from the weight of both architecture and metaphor. Stones are not simply material for building, with their value residing in their potential for development, exchange or wealth. Nor does their aesthetic value reside only in their potential for metaphor, for representing something other. Durham's work asks that we consider the stone itself. The Enlightenment thinking that reinforced binaries between the animate and inanimate, nature and culture—of which Locke's thinking was representative—is challenged by Durham's perspective. Durham's work operates in opposition to the state using land and resources for nation-building, for constructing prisons, museums, infrastructure, borders, and so on. Here 'nature' is excluded from civil society and the state; or rather, the state is unconcerned with the well-being of broader ecologies. As walls form a literal separation, so too do the binaries that form the foundation of this narrow view of the world.

For Durham, stone is an ally. Rejecting a functionalist view of the earth and acknowledging this allyship, Durham reframes our understanding of subjectivity and sociality more broadly. Yet to Durham, as with many of the artists we discuss, this is not an academic question. There are very real social, political and ecological implications of this reframing. Within our accelerating planetary crisis, significant and foundational changes must be made to the way that we understand and engage with our surroundings; we must ask difficult questions and reflect critically on the responses. In a recent essay for *Third Text* Durham frames it well: "What, for example, if we had a world law against the buying and selling of land? If, as so many stateless peoples say, the earth is the earth and not a commodity?"<sup>4</sup>

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## Images:

**Page 46, Page 50:** Kelly Jazvac, *Plastiglomerates*, 2013, molten plastic debris and beach sediment, including sand, rock and wood, found objects resulting from a scientific collaboration between Jazvac, geologist Patricia Corcoran and oceanographer Charles Moore, photo by Jeff Elstone.

**Page 47:** Maggie Groat, *Tools*, 2013, architectural fragments and materials for building, image courtesy of the artist.

**Page 48:** Tsēma Igharas, *Ore Body*, installation at Gallery 44, documentation by Jocelyn Reynolds, 2016.

**Page 49:** Maggie Groat, *Living Rocks, Counter Weights and Items for Catching the Light*, 2013, image courtesy of the artist.

**Page 51:** Jimmie Durham, *Self-Portrait Pretending to be a Stone Statue of Myself*, 2006, in the group exhibition "Rocks, Stones, and Dust," University of Toronto Art Centre, from October 28-December 18, 2015, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.